

# Nursing moms rebuffed at gyms

**Incidents suggest many don't know law protects right to breast-feed in public.**

**By Jennifer K. Morita -- Bee Staff Writer**

***Published 12:01 am PDT Sunday, July 23, 2006***

On a blistering summer day, Jane Cerussi was discreetly nursing her fussy infant by the pool at an Elk Grove gym, when a manager asked her to move or cover up because other members had complained.

"I never expected something like this to happen in this day and age in Northern California," Cerussi said.

A similar incident recently at another California Family Fitness gym in Rocklin is calling attention to an often overlooked law protecting a mother's right to breast-feed in public.

Despite the law and studies showing the health benefits of the practice, advocates say what happened in Elk Grove and Rocklin reflects a society still unaccustomed to the sight of nursing mothers in public places.

Last week, the California Women's Law Center sent a letter to the locally owned California Family Fitness chain after the Rocklin woman was told she couldn't breast-feed where she could be seen by other members.

The employee had said breast-feeding in a public area was "offensive" to other gym members, and when the woman complained to a manager she was told that her actions were "disrespectful," according to the letter.

But under a California law enacted in 1997, women are allowed to breast-feed anywhere in public where they're entitled to be present.

"The law is perfectly clear," California Women's Law Center Executive Director Katie Buckland said.

"There is no wiggle room, no gray zone or any ambiguity. On the other hand, not everybody is completely up-to-date on what the law is."

California Family Fitness co-owner Larry Gury said his company reacted by contacting managers at all 13 Sacramento-area clubs, reminding them of a woman's right to breast-feed.

"It's in our employee manual, but it will be reviewed more strongly in our trainings and we'll make a better effort to make our employees and our members aware," said Gury.

The fitness chain also sent a written apology to the mother in Rocklin and will contact Cerussi as well, according to Gury.

"We're very sorry for the incidents," Gury said.

"We understand there may have been some embarrassment, and for that we certainly apologize. We feel really badly about it."

Despite laws in 42 states allowing public breast-feeding, La Leche League International spokeswoman Mary Lofton said incidents like the ones at California Family Fitness are common.

Women recently staged "nurse-ins" at Starbucks stores in Florida and Maryland to protest after employees were accused of asking breast-feeding mothers to leave or cover up more.

Earlier this summer, two incidents involving breast-feeding mothers at Victoria's Secret stores in Wisconsin and Massachusetts prompted a nationwide protest.

"Virtually all of the establishments relent or say, 'We didn't realize it was a law,' and send their apologies and say they will train their staff to be better informed," Lofton said.

Companies and their employees aren't the only ones needing better training about the benefits of breast-feeding, according to Lofton.

"Ironically, exposure is not really the issue," Lofton said, noting that most nursing mothers try to be as discreet as possible. "It's the act of nursing that people are not comfortable with. We have a long history of bottle-feeding in our culture."

Cerussi said she was nursing in the shade, keeping an eye on her daughter swimming nearby, when a manager asked her to cover up with a towel.

"It was like 100 degrees in the shade and I didn't want to suffocate my newborn," she said. "I didn't feel like I was being immodest. I was showing a lot less flesh than the women running around in string bikinis."

Breast-feeding in the United States began to decline in the 1930s after the introduction of infant formula and as women began to give birth in hospitals, instead of their homes, Lofton said.

It reached an all-time low in 1971, when less than 25 percent of women in hospitals began nursing their babies.

Research has shown that human milk not only protects infants from illnesses such as colds, flu and ear infections, but also enhances brain development, according to Lofton.

Today, roughly 70 percent of women nurse their infants while still in the hospital, said Lofton.

The resurgence in breast-feeding has prompted a growing number of public establishments, such as malls and large department stores, to create private areas with comfortable seating for nursing mothers.

Gury said many of his company's newer clubs have lounge areas for nursing mothers who want more privacy.

"Breast-feeding is very healthy and very normal," Gury said. "But it is a very sensitive issue. I think that in time, people will become more comfortable with it."

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